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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 000623

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: GRAND RALLY MARKS END OF LONG MARCH;AL PROMISES
RETURN TO PARLIAMENT

REF: DHAKA 580

Classified By: Economic Chief David Renz; reason 1.4(d)

11. (U) On February 5, following a three day march from all quadrants of the country, the Awami League and other opposition parties held a large rally in Dhaka. The leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina stated that the AL would return to Parliament this week, in order to formally present its demands for reform of the caretaker government system and the electoral commission. She threatened that if her party's demands are not met, the AL would not contest the next elections. She also laid out plans for upcoming agitation, including country wide demonstrations on February 8, a national hartal on February 15, and regional protests during the first week of March.

12. (U) Replaying well-worn themes, Hasina said the BNP stole the last election and accused it of amassing fortunes while not providing for the poor or supporting development. Islamic parties in the ruling coalition are in league with the JMB bombers, she said, demanding that the ruling coalition resign immediately because it has lost the mandate of the people. She also referred to the large police exercise in Kushtia to capture Bangla Bhai last month, as "eyewash" meant to impress a "foreign dignitary" (read A/S Rocca.) In a new twist, she fingered the BDG for failing to condemn the recently published cartoons of Mohamed or to demand an apology from Denmark as proof that the BDG's claim to be pro-Islamic is hypocritical.

13. (C) Unconfirmed reports put turnout at something less than the opposition's November 22 Grand Rally, which had an estimated 100,000 participants. The rally was generally peaceful, but there were reports of skirmishes between marchers and the youth wing of the BNP in Comilla, about a one hour drive from Dhaka. The BDG had deployed approximately 8,000 members of the police, the RAB and the Bangladeshi rifles in and around the rally site.

14. (C) Initial concerns that police would prevent marchers from entering Dhaka proved unfounded. Nonetheless, the opposition alleged that more than 10,000 marchers and supporters had been arrested during the long march. While this number could be inflated, the BDG's claim that increased arrests over the last few days were unrelated to the Long March is not credible. Following a writ of petition by opposition leaders, the High Court (the second highest court in Bangladesh) issued an injunction against the BDG. The injunction prohibited further warrantless arrests under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance section 86, and demanded that the BDG prove why their warrantless arrests under Section 54 of the national Code of Criminal Procedure should not be declared illegal. Sections 54 and 86 are routinely abused by law enforcers during opposition rallies; this is at least the third time the court has ruled against the BDG's abuse of these provisions.

15. (C) Comment: By reversing position and agreeing to return to parliament this week to present her demands for reform, Hasina has found a face-saving way to save her seat in the assembly, which was procedurally threatened by her boycott of parliament. Hasina knows that there is little if any chance that the ruling coalition will move to amend the constitution or reform the election commission. By agreeing to return, however, she has also bought time that will enable her to call for a symbolic mass opposition resignation from parliament to protest the government's failure to agree to her proposals, without triggering bi-elections for the newly vacant seats. Whether she will follow through on her threats to boycott elections is still not clear. If she does, it's likely to do more damage to AL than to the BNP. End comment.
CHAMMAS